

## Chapter 7    **The Voysey Inheritance**

### **Individuality**

Voysey has been a considerable influence on the younger generation. It may be due to him that rough plaster has become the fashionable finish for exterior walls, perhaps too it was his influence that has produced so many advocates of the low ceiling, of which he was so fond. Some of Voysey's external features, such as corner buttresses, have also been imitated. At all events Voysey is the most individualistic of the busy domestic architects in London today, and his courage in seeking new ways and displaying his own personal art to good advantage is as rare as it is refreshing in the prevailing conservatism of the London movement.<sup>1</sup>

This contemporary assessment from Muthesius has an air of objectivity – what native critic would have dared to refer to the 'prevailing conservatism' of architectural trends over the years when Voysey was forming his career? Yet it is true that, however inspired and avant-garde it may have been, the work of such men as Voysey, Baillie Scott, Newton, even Rennie Mackintosh was in various crucial ways 'conservative'. It is only in understanding this apparent conflict in a creative style, between the forces of conservatism or tradition and those of individuality or innovation, that it is possible to understand the domestic architecture of the years surrounding the birth of the present century, and the role that Voysey played in forming it and what came after it.

During the Great War that effectively undermined and eventually destroyed the world he knew and many of the principles and standards that were dear to him, Voysey produced the best sustained account of his views in a book entitled *Individuality*.<sup>2</sup> His insight, often erratic in matters not related to the particular skills he possessed, was on this occasion particularly keen:

Surely it is evident that the most far-reaching and important effect of the present war, will be to force men to distinguish more clearly between intellectual and spiritual culture, and thus to encourage the latter and by so doing strengthen and sustain individuality.<sup>3</sup>

Had he only said 'the former' instead of 'the latter' he would have been right; even so it is an intriguing remark. It points the way from the individuality of his own career first to the mock individuality of the acres of small suburban villas which were the speculative builders' acknowledgment of Voysey's particular genius; second to the substantial individuality, which he abhorred, of the Modern

Movement which, like it or not, kept architecture and design moving in the interregnum between the two great world wars.

Much of *Individuality* was based upon Voysey's perception of the way in which his work and views related to the English architectural tradition. Muthesius, for instance, in *Das englische Haus*, claims that Voysey cast tradition aside in his work (remember that Muthesius was writing before those developments we have seen where Voysey later in his career turned more and more to medieval inspiration) yet Voysey himself was always much exercised by the way in which his work related to English tradition – the two are not contradictory. It is important to understand this for its effect on Voysey's work was substantial:

Men cannot be honest while imitating the sentiments of others which they often neither feel or understand.<sup>4</sup>

Voysey was at once fiercely parochial, for he believed that one could 'feel or understand' only those sentiments which arose from one's own culture and country, and also whole-heartedly opposed to materialism:

The lack of noble sentiment in our modern buildings is due to the materialism of the age, which has led to the assumption of a foreign style, and the acquisition of material qualities only. Thought and feeling are ignored, hence the works are still-born.<sup>5</sup>

This led him naturally to the vernacular tradition of his own country for it was only here that he could find roots which he could regard as truly his own, which were untainted by the stylistic excesses which he attributed both to foreign-ness and to excessive wealth, both being for him corrupting influences. This puritanical severity is still further emphasized by the constraints he then felt in the ways in which he could make use of the limited heritage he recognized:

Reverence for the past is admirable when exercised by the individual for his own guidance, but mischievous when imposed upon others.<sup>6</sup>

It only remained then for Voysey to define the way in which the designer, influenced by tradition in this special way, could bring his influence to bear on the lives of people. First his field of reference should be large and he should not be too proud to deal with any small detail:

... it must follow that matter in any way affected by man must partake of and reflect his spirit, his thoughts and feelings. We recognize this in the Cathedral – why, then, not in the lamp-post?<sup>7</sup>

Second he should not let himself be influenced by whim or fashion:

If we could set our hearts on proclaiming nothing but the truth about ourselves, the fear of public opinion would vanish, standards of fashion would cease to exist, and our homes would then be furnished only with what we needed for daily use; and each object would have to be as beautiful as we could make it or procure it, in order to harmonise with our feeling, rather than with an assumed convention.<sup>8</sup>

In this way Voysey defined the limits of the individuality he felt; it was an idiosyncratic view but one which led, logically and inexorably enough, from the love and knowledge of the English vernacular bred into him from his Yorkshire childhood, through the puritanical strain inculcated in him, again at an early age, to the wish to surround himself and all men with carefully conceived, designed and wrought objects.

Reinforcing the sense of individuality which Voysey felt and in which he worked was the constant background and accompaniment of his distinctive religious and moralistic views. There was a general basis for this which was rooted in the earlier part of the nineteenth century; as has been said above, Voysey was greatly impressed and moulded by the views of A.W.N.Pugin. Pugin had combined, to a degree unique in the history of British architecture and design since the Middle Ages ended, a sense of religion and practicality; his work and his God were tightly bound together. In a less demonstrative way, befitting one who was as close to Puritanism as was Pugin to the highest reaches of Catholicism (several of Voysey's early clients were Quakers), Voysey shared this preoccupation. So on various occasions we find him referring to the high moralists of art, either of his own day or of an earlier one. He speaks warmly of March Phillipps; and when he seeks a source for the basis of his own philosophy it is to one of the formative British moralists of his century that he refers:

As Carlyle has said, the spiritual is the parent and first cause of the practical.<sup>9</sup>

What is convincing above all about Voysey's sense of religion in art is that he so consistently adhered to it throughout his long career. And he was aware of the dangers which it contained:

Although reading the newspapers as little as possible, I am yet impressed by the frequency with which we meet the statement that, 'an artist must express himself' . . . The writers who mean by it to emphasise the importance of absolute sincerity are of course right; but to the young mind it may mean egoism, which is the most poisonous perversion of individuality. The very wish to express oneself is corrupting to the soul and intoxicating to personal vanity.<sup>10</sup>

## **Gothic and Grotesque**

It is important to remember two recurring themes in Voysey's work. His reputation rests on the principles of plainness and simplicity. Walls are white roughcast on the outside, untreated oak panelling or plaster surface devoid of decorative mouldings inside; dimensions are modest; everything is understated. Two things disturb this consistency and it is necessary to realize why they do so; the first is the grotesque form; the second the Gothic. The grotesque has been pointed to several times in the preceding chapters and recurs throughout Voysey's career: the porch at St Dunstan's Road, the sundial at Norney, the corbelled carved heads at Broadleys, the profile incised in the bedroom chair and so on. Other instances have not been specifically mentioned, the most notable being the small devil which Voysey worked up himself for casting in bronze or plaster and which was a caricature of himself – this particular grotesque was also carved in much larger form, in stone, for the house he built for Müntzer at Guildford. The same theme, the use of the grotesque form or figure, also recurs often among the flowers and birds of his pattern design output. His use of it is very medieval; it is part jest, for very often we know or suspect that his forms are based on those of the particular client; part serious for it brings a cautionary personal note into the

buildings where it appears, a reminder of ephemerality, human vanity or whatever. What is fascinating is that the note that the grotesque strikes in Voysey's work is so discordant when seen against the pattern and background of what we expect from him. Yet it brings a vital element of warmth to his work and emphasizes his basic humanity. Similar in some of its roots is the prepossession with Gothic form; but where the grotesque relates to Voysey's own sense of humanity, this relates rather to his sense of propriety. He speaks of:

... the Gothic principles of evolving our homes out of local conditions and requirements.<sup>11</sup>

He goes on in the same piece to attack the principles of Classical symmetry and adds:

The Gothic process is the exact opposite; outside appearances are evolved from internal fundamental conditions; staircases and windows come where most convenient to use ... the creation of a beautiful Gothic building, instead of being a conception based on a temple made with hands, is based on the temple of a human soul.<sup>12</sup>

In this sense it can be seen that a 'Gothic' principle did infuse all of his work; this, though, is a highly specialized and limited interpretation of the Gothic and in surveying his work in the previous chapters what has emerged is that Gothic forms were particularly apparent in it both early in his career and late, but hardly at all in between. Certainly Voysey himself was always aware of the conflict of interest here and this may account for his abandonment of any Gothic element in the best and most productive part of his life. For on the one hand he was emphatic:

The revivalism of the present century ... has done more to stamp out men's artistic common sense and understanding than any movement I know. The unintelligent, unappreciative use of the works of the past, which is the rule, has surrounded us at every turn with deadly dulness.<sup>13</sup>

And later in his life:

Surely a national style would be both possible and desirable as it was in the Tudor period, if allowed to develop out of national conditions and requirements. It is the ingrafting of a foreign style, or manner of buildings, which is so poisonous and utterly subversive of any national growth.<sup>14</sup>

So for many years he was scrupulous about keeping any actual element of the Gothic out of his work though he believed – and with justification – that it was imbued with the same spirit which had moved the Gothic builders. Again, there are echoes of Pugin. As he grew older and as his practice began to shrink his feeling seemed to strengthen that he should acknowledge the link that bound him to the style and traditions of medieval Britain and to the early part of the Victorian Gothic Revival personified for him by Pugin.



## The Inheritance

This book began from the precept that Voysey was a key figure and has attempted, in monograph form, to outline the progression of his work through his career, the principal developments it showed, the major buildings and designs, the unfulfilled possibilities. All of this has been done without a great deal of reference to the other events of the years covered and to the influence that Voysey's work might have had on others. This course has been chosen without real apology, for these facets are the subject not of another chapter but of another book. Voysey worked on his own; he did not, generally speaking, school pupils; he did not court publicity; when he spoke publicly it was not to any smart set or to potential clients but by means of lectures delivered principally to fellow architects and designers and craftsmen – and this he did only infrequently. His writings, interesting to the student, were not compulsive, the overlay of moralizing being quite a heavy price to pay for the valuable hints gained. He did not show the facility in print, the fluency and sense of flair and inventiveness which Baillie Scott achieved; he did not, like Lethaby, become a mentor and instructor who spoke to everybody and particularly to generations of students; he did not reach the potential clients, mix in society and sell his genius in the flamboyant style of Lutyens; nor did he parade his talent across Europe as did Mackintosh. In a way he was an architect's architect; his stand of principle, his dedication, his purism throughout his career, were probably more understandable to those who shared his aim to design beautiful, simple, workable things than to those who needed to commission a modern house. Only they could fully comprehend the dedication and the unwillingness to offer compromise which his best work showed.

Yet for all this Voysey enjoyed a considerable success and reputation in his lifetime and has, more or less consistently since his death, retained a substantial aura, a sense in the even moderately well-informed onlooker that he stood somewhere near to the centre of the architectural events of his day. He is a lesson in what constitutes the basis of reputation and nowhere is this more true than in the impact he made in Europe and particularly in Germany. He was no traveller and so any knowledge of him and his work outside England was transmitted by written word and word of mouth. From an early date his work figured in the German periodical, *Dekorative Kunst*; it also appeared at the 1900 Paris Exhibition; and of course, as has been mentioned, he was praised in Hermann Muthesius's book, *Das englische Haus* which, appearing in the first decade of this century, gave wide currency to the events of English architecture of the period.

Nearer home one has to think of Voysey in terms of the massive housebuilding, the suburban development, of the early part of this century. This is not a subject susceptible of facile interpretation or of quick summary; too many forces are involved, social, political and economic, before the basic but not pre-emptive issue of design can be introduced. What Voysey and a handful of colleagues offered was a style of domestic vernacular which appealed to a wide public; it had a sense of tradition, discernible bits of half-timbering and leaded windows as well as more subtle devices. It was pleasingly asymmetrical and rambling, qualities inexorably suggestive of a kind of freedom and improvisation appreciated by many people. It

was also, in terms of superficial impact on the eye, refreshingly new and could not be mistaken for any other of the prevalent domestic styles of the previous century. So among the many styles that remained popular, both in the rather dignified medium-sized country-house building in the years just before the Great War and in the lower and middle-class speculative housing boom of the 1920s and later, the style that became known as stockbroker Tudor or mock-Tudor has always more than held its own. Indeed it has come to signify a whole aspect of the British class system and British life. It should be stressed that in this general sense those nicknames cover both the detached suburban house type and the more mass-produced ribbon development house. It would indeed require another book to define the various influences at work here and to allocate specific roles to Voysey and to Newton, Harrison Townsend, Arnold Mitchell and others from his immediate contemporaries in the forming of such movements; one would also need to look back carefully to the sources which influenced them, the generation of Norman Shaw. The conclusion here can be no more than that Voysey played an important role in these movements. He designed houses that intrigued people, caused them to think and led them to incorporate elements into their own homes or their own designs. Equally important, he fostered the idea of the architect designer, the man who handled all details of his trade from the house right down to the knives and forks. Not that this was a new phenomenon; Pugin, after all, had done the same thing and after him others. Voysey continued the tradition, perhaps gave it some extra momentum and persuaded people a little more conclusively of the need to surround themselves with appropriate and beautiful things.

The Voysey house has come into our architectural language as a prototype and there are sufficient examples of it shown in the preceding pages for it not to be necessary again to offer a summary of its salient points. It was much copied, much adapted to suit particular needs; it has also been much debased in copying but that hardly matters. The man who produced it and the furniture and allied items that went with it combined the pleasing qualities of being truly distinctive and genuinely unassuming. More important, his work was outstanding and influential. From his personal qualities, his chosen manner of work and his achievement the picture that emerges is of an idiosyncratic talent and man which well fits him for the title of 'an architect of individuality'.